

Opening Statement
The Honorable Steve Chabot, Chairman
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

“Shifting Sands: Political Transitions in the Middle East, Part 1”
April 13, 2011

Good afternoon. I want to welcome all of my colleagues to the third hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. This hearing was called to assess the current trajectory of the political transitions in the Middle East and to take stock where the U.S. stands today.

Nearly 4 months ago, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Ben Arous, Tunisia, touched off a tidal wave of unrest that continues to shake the Arab world to its very foundation. His self-immolation became a symbol around which Tunisians united to overthrow former President Ben Ali whose repressive regime had at that point been ruling for over twenty years.

Arab citizens throughout the Middle East looked on and, inspired by the revolution in Tunisia, took to the streets in unprecedented numbers. For us sitting here today, it is perhaps most striking that unlike in the past, the citizens of the region are not protesting against the U.S. or Israel, but against the failings of their own governments. Hidden under a thin veneer of stability, Arab autocracies for decades have allowed the social and political foundations of their countries to fester and rot. It was only a matter of time until the citizens of the region stood up and together said “enough.”

Although each country has its own distinctive history and its own set of unique circumstances, the current unrest is at its core about rewriting the social contract throughout the Arab world. The citizens in the streets stand collectively and demand the same fundamental human rights that are the birthright of every individual on earth. They remind us that the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness do not stop at the water’s edge.

4 months into this transition, it is appropriate to pause and assess where the region is heading and to examine the effectiveness of the Administration’s policy to date. The regional shifts happening throughout the Middle East place the United States and our allies at a precipice in history. The entire strategic framework upon which our foreign policy in that region has been based is rapidly transforming and U.S. policy must transform with it.

It is however unclear today whether the Administration’s foreign policy is in reality adapting as it must. Over the past months the Administration has dithered and vacillated. On several occasions high-level officials have even contradicted one another, suggesting that not only is there no unified vision, but no clear policy either. This has left Members of Congress and citizens of the region alike confused as to what the Administration’s objective actually is and with what means it seeks to achieve it.

Also missing is a clear strategic vision for the Middle East as a whole. Rather than stepping back and determining first what its desired end-state is, the Administration is stuck in reaction mode. The result is that foreign policy becomes slave to each individual development on the ground and consequently the U.S. appears indecisive and noncommittal.

Instead of leading the way to a more prosperous future for the peoples of the Middle East, the Administration looks as if it is waiting to see who ends up on top before picking a side. Instead of viewing this as an unprecedented opportunity to help spread democracy and freedom to parts of the world that do not currently know it, the Administration gives the impression that the protests are more of an inconvenience; that they are getting in the way of grand plans to extend outstretched hands in pursuit of unclenched fists.

Nearly 6 year ago, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stood in front of an audience at the American University of Cairo and declared that "For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East -- and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people." Similarly, over 7 years ago before an audience at the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush stated that "As changes come to the Middle Eastern region, those with power should ask themselves: Will they be remembered for resisting reform, or for leading it?" These words are perhaps more fitting today than at any other time in recent history. Although President Bush was speaking about regional leaders, it is my firm belief that U.S. policymakers should ask themselves the same question.